DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 932 HE 003 904

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TITLE	Consortia: A Challenge to Institutional Autonomy.
INSTITUTION	Group 10 for the Seventies, Chicago Heights, Ill.
PUB DATE	15 Jan 73
NOTE	20p.; Speech presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges (San Francisco, January 1973)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Administrative Organization; *Consortia; *Cooperative Programs; Educational Change; *Higher Education; *Institutional Administration; Institutional Role; *Interinstitutional Cooperation

ABSTRACT

The kinds of impact a consortium might have on the operations of its member institutions are presented following an overview of the consortium's challenge to institutional autonomy. Ten attitudinal forms of consortium impact challenging autonomy include: (1) the rest are going ahead so do it anyway, (2) infiltration and multiple loyalities of faculty and staff, (3) if it becomes funded, then participate, (4) modification of personal adjustments required of individuals in their role expectations, (5) a family member has special obligations, (6) don't talk about us when we are absent, (7) we want to be the way we are now, (8) it is expensive to participate but we can't afford to pullout, (9) more than one consortium wants us, and (10) united we stand, divided we fall. (Author/MJM)

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ED 074932

PRESENTATION

at

ANNUAL MEETING

of the

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES

January 15, 1973

San Francisco Hilton Hotel

CONSORTIA: A CHALLENGE TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

by

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Session: CONSORTIA: A CHALLENGE TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

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CONSORTIA: A CHALLENGE TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

With no intention of implying that the consortium is a challenge to the existence of the institutions that own and control it, it is certainly of value to inquire how consortium activities relate to the options or choices of an institution in the conduct of its affairs. If one is inclined nevertheless to view the consortium as a bomb with potential for destroying the independence of an institution, it certainly is not one with a short fuse.

It is not my purpose to describe or characterize the vast array of inter-institutional arrangements that colleges and universities have established in recent years, nor speak to the way they are structured, nor to the range of activities they have underway. I hope it will suffice to say that my reference to a consortium includes those voluntary inter-institutional arrangements with a formal arrangement among three or more colleges or universities with full-time staff leadership, support from member institutions and a diversified program of services including projects in academic affairs.

It is tempting to portray the opportunity and promise that the consortium holds for the isolated college, particularly within a changing and complex environment. Indirectly, certain virtues will be touched upon in passing but I see my primary task as that of examining the kinds of impact a consortium might have on the operations of its member institutions.

I suppose we talk about the consortium as a challenge to institutional autonomy because a successful consortium is presumed to have overcome it.

Institutional autonomy, in our higher education world, is certainly not well defined and probably not well understood particularly among its practitioners. As a symbolic shield against state control, regional planning or inconvenient pressures originating from outside the institution it is drawn upon freely, sometimes even in association with academic freedom for good measure.

Some would make a distinction between substantive autonomy, which leaves institutions free to set their own goals, policies and programs and procedural autonomy, which leaves institutions free to choose those techniques or approaches they might use in carrying out their goals, policies and programs. Theoretically, an institution could give up its choice of how to it might conduct one of its programs and still leave intact its substantive autonomy, that is its privelege to decide to have such a program. Such distinctions give us trouble, however, when an institution doesn't want a program or can't afford a program unless it is done in a certain way.

Whichever way it is viewed, the institution that faces externally reduced options may consider that it faces a challenge to an autonomy it once had. This is not new. Many external pressures in the past have tended to reduce an institution's choices, whether at the policy making level or at the level of how such policies were to be carried out. Among these were alumni, towns people, major donors, guidelines for grants, personal preferences of individual board members, accrediting associations, state appropriations and countless others. New external pressures have joined the earlier ones such as federal regulations and report systems, housing and building construction requirements, financial aid stipulations, employment and admission practices, facilities justifications, state commissions and state plans, state support and regulation and student demands.

Activities of consortia can now be added to the list.

It is also useful to consider whether institutional autonomy is a challenge to a voluntary consortium. Many people feel this is so and go on to point out that until a consortium is given authority to require adherence to its joint decisions, it will be limited to pretending and playing at the game of collaboration and limited to minor, innocuous activities.

The brief history of the nation's consortia appears both to support and to deny this skepticism of voluntary consortia. With so few consortia even having reached the adolescent period their development, it takes a bit of sorting out of one's observations to determine what the true state of affairs might be. The temptation is to expect significant achievements to come easily, then become disillusioned and impatient and then naively move on to some other structuring of inter-institutional coordination with renewed expectations. In this setting, institutional autonomy becomes the scapegoat but there is a great deal more to resolving the problems of collaboration among colleges than simply imposing an external will.

Fortunately, the skeptic can be challenged in his analysis. While some consortia are drifting along, others are beginning to develop significant services, without overt acquisition of authority. On the other hand, one could simply observe that among the approximately seventy major consortia, few have passed out of existence and a high proportion of those that did have reactivated again. It is not that so many have been successful but that they survive for another try in spite of lack of significant successes.

An analysis of the consortium's persistence and strength should be less directed to how it is organized than to how it operates. The processes at work, particularly those that influence and direct institutional decisions, seem to explain the magic of voluntary participation.

In speaking, then, to the influences a consortium may have upon institutional choice, we speak at once to how a consortium gets on with its work and how it challenges so called institutional autonomy.

THE FORMS IN WHICH THE CHALLENGE PRESENTS ITSELF

In attempting to develop descriptions of each process that seems involved in challenging autonomy I found it difficult to provide appropriate labels. Instead, I drew upon expressions frequently heard in and out of consortium deliberations that caught the essence of each form. Hopefully, these phrases will never find their way into a taxonomy but they may prompt recognition from one's experiences.

1. The Rest are Going Ahead and Do it Anyway

Agreement among institutions to cooperate on an important activity takes time to develop and involves study and discussions. While difficult to arrive at, once agreement within an important segment of a group of institutions has been reached, they may very well see no reason to wait for the remainder of the group to see the light. They will wish to proceed without further delay.

Those institutions still reluctant at that point in time or those who have minor objections face a new situation. The project is likely to go, in the name of the consortium, and they must explain why they do not wish to take up a project with advantages so obvious to the rest. Since this situation develops at the culmination of the consortium's work on the matter, real reasons and hard facts must be given. Continuing reluctance or simple petulance casts a bad light on an institution's membership and in getting its own preferences among future projects.

Staying out of a project with good reason is indeed possible, but then, continuing proximity among institutions in a consortium invites "one-upmanship" to be practiced by those who participated in a project, should things go well.

A vigorous or perceptive minority in a consortium's membership can pull the rest of the membership along. This represents an important external leverage for change which can only partially be controlled by the defending institution.

2. Infiltration and Multiple Loyalties of Faculty and Staff

If the first challenge was stated in terms of institutional choice, it was only to identify the residue decision - whether an institution, in a final sense, participated at all in a project.

Actually, the established consortium soon develops a number of levels of decision making. This is made necessary because it is soon discovered that voluntary cooperative projects don't go well unless those on the respective campuses who must carry them out had a part in designing them and really want them.

As a consequence, a proposed project reaching the presidential or institutional level of choice as to whether to participate may already have the endorsement of that campus's faculty or staff representative. He now has his own vested interest in the project. Moreover, the other participating institutions already know from the preceding discussions the real pros and cons of that institution's position.

Thus exposed, institutional identity and integrity could be found in some state of compromise. Unless an institution takes care in the selection, instruction and follow-up of its representatives to consortium committees, it is quite vulnerable to several external and internal forces. Strong leaders from other campuses could influence the institution's representative. Also, a staff member who fails to get a desired project approved by his own administration could take it to the consortium committee and return home with the leverage of the first challenge.

Communications among staff on a campus being what it is doesn't help matters either. The representative doesn't always tell his superiors on the campus how his project is going until it has reached the proper state of readiness. Thus you can have a president say in irate fashion at the final deliberation, "this proposal is not in my institution's interest; I wonder who proposed it!" If in truth that president's own dean pushed the proposal, it is not likely that anyone will tell.

3. If it Becomes Funded, We Shall Participate

The screening process that establishes those projects a consortium will operate in a given year is a great deal more complex than identifying a consensus of priorities of the membership. Some institutional priorities are not well served by a joint project when individual effort is easier and more efficient. This could place the consortium in the position of focusing at times on second or third level institutional priorities for this reason alone.

If institutional funds are scarce, then it means that funds beyond institutional support will be required. At this point, the donor preferences or grant guidelines becomes an important factor in determining not only which joint projects the consortium will do but also how they will be carried out.

As an aside, if supporting agencies (and, in fact the rest of us too) better understood the unique procedural characteristics of consortium operations, some joint endeavors would not be forced to do things the hard way.

Budgets are important statements of how cooperation will actually take place. A consortium does not survive long if it adopts the policy of "first get the money, then we shall decide how to spend it."

A well thought out proposal budget, even though not required by the donor, makes for fewer misunderstandings at the time of implementation. Agreement on what needs to be done jointly is difficult enough. Deciding how much money each participating institution deserves after the grant is available is a gauntlet no consortium should have to run.

This same process, regretfully, must also be faced even with adequate preparation since there is seldom full funding of a project. Where to make cuts is nearly as volatile an issue.

The process of balancing the funds needed to carry out the joint aspects of the project with those needed for individual campus activities related to the project seems to be an inescapable trial for institutional autonomy.

If the consensus of the institutions is that minimum operational funds for the joint aspects are given the priority with a view to assuring that the inter-institutional project actually comes off, then there is less for institutional costs. It is understandable that the president of an institution voting against such a consensus might wonder aloud, "I have a feeling the consortium will be around long after my institution has gone bankrupt."

4. Who Gets to Be the White Knight

A sense of direction is essential for any enterprise involving the cooperative efforts of a group of individuals. Consortia are recent and early enough in their development that the leaderships of the participating institutions are not very clear as to what they can expect or desire of a consortium.

There is a marked tendency for campus leaders to stay closer to a more clearly viewed sense of institutional direction as it relates to the consortium and leave to the consortium staff the sensing out of the consortium's destiny. "We'll tell you when you guess wrong," campus leaders will say.

In this setting, the consortium staff will then set what they perceive to be the short and long-range courses of action that will achieve the eventual approval of the participating institutions. These will most likely be in the form of programs designed to resolve or reduce the most pressing problems that vex the membership.

To the extent these programs are successful and also to the extent that consortium projects take on glamour, statewide and national attention, a "white knight" syndrome is generated. Rescue from outside the campus is not always appreciated by those who feel capable of rescuing themselves.

Somehow a member institution finds it difficult to claim the consortium as part of itself. Reflecting traditional patterns of territorial rights in higher education, the consortium is treated by a member institution as belonging to the others, or as a separate and competing agency for scarce resources.

This situation influences the roles of the principals in conducting consortium activities, as perceived by the campus staff and by the consortium staff. At a recent meeting, a panel of consortium directors had just addressed themselves to the sense of mission held by consortium directors when a faculty member from the audience arose and asked "who asked you guys to play the role of white knight?"

If there is room for a leadership role for the consortium director and his staff in the progress and development of a member campus, then a modification of institutional autonomy has taken place. This modification seems to be most visible in the personal adjustments required of individuals in their role expectations. It is nearly impossible for a given faculty or staff member on a campus to match consortium staff to their institution's hierarchy. The consortium director, for example, doesn't fit a campus's

pecking order. Since consortium staff work in a role that is neither quite inside the institution nor outside, the role expectations for that staff never quite stabilizes in terms of traditional settings.

Unless consortia staff go away and leave the member campuses alone, which is most unlikely, they will in their personal capacities become a growing irritation to traditional concepts of institutional autonomy.

5. A Member of a Family has Special Obligations

When you become a member of a family, you have certain responsibilities. Institutions that are near neighbors or institutions with similar profiles or characteristics have often felt they were in competition with each other for students or at least for a place in the sun. Yet, cooperative or joint ventures have grown most often among these very institutions. Early in the development of an up and coming consortium, one hears such expressions as, "when we became better acquainted, we found we weren't in such great competition after all." And, "we are looking for this kind of student and they are really looking for another kind". While certain areas of competition will probably always continue to survive and prosper among members of any type of consortium those areas where cooperation begins to develop have a tendency to stifle or modify traditional competition. This is probably due to improved communications among those institutional staff members concerned. They are no longer dealing with strangers and too much becomes known about each other to pursue old myths.

The tendency of feeling "we are better than they" begins in a consortium to break down or, in polite company, is no longer expressed or inferred around the table. While the inhibitions that come from politeness take their toll on convictions, perhaps the most persuasive influence is the growing intimacy and detail in which each member of the consortium knows the other members.

If there is a substantial level of inter-institutional activity, there will be a number of institutional representatives involved all of which makes it quite possible to sort fact from fiction from the diverse sources.

These factors, in turn, require an openess in decision-making. A curt response from an institution that, "we don't need this project" will not always suffice, nor will it be tendered without some explanation.

The freedom to recruit each other's faculty is likewise inhibited, particularly if one dean must sit next week with the other at a schedule committee meeting. On the other side of the coin, there are perhaps examples of a planned transfer of a faculty member from one institution to another not initiated by the faculty member himself. For certain, faculty moonlighting at a neighboring campus is curtailed or encouraged but in any case given greater surveillance from the institutions concerned in a consortium.

It would be a fine thing to say with equal firmness that a consortium has a significant impact in inhibiting member institutions from developing new programs in direct competion with existing ones. Indeed, family obligations do dictate advance consultation, and there are many examples of this to the mutual advantage of those concerned or affected. One can expect more of this as consortia continue to mature. There still remains a "live and let live" area of reserve particularly as it relates to the future aspirations of an institution. Thus, if there is only need for one given instructional program in the region and the new entry believes it can drive the earlier program off the market, it will feel that it still has some entitlement to do so. This is not surprising when a burgeoning public institution seeks to replace a faltering private college program.

One of the interesting little diversities among consortia is that the previous example would be taken up around the table in one consortium but discussed only in private between the two parties in another consortium.

Selectivity in admissions may vary among members of a consortium, but in consortium student exchange arrangements and practices rarely if ever are such differences recognized. This presumable is in recognition of what appears to be an underlying assumption among a consortium's members, namely that all members view each other with mutual respect as equals in regard to those areas in which they cooperate.

6. Don't Talk About Us When We are Absent

The choice of an institution as to whether to join a consortium serving its region or to be represented at a meeting at which matters important to it are on the agenda might be cited as another way in which an institution's options are limited by a consortium. Going it alone against real, imagined or potential collusion of its neighbors requires size and strength or a low expectation of how much institutions will cooperate. A sign of the coming of age of a regional consortium is a flurry of membership applications from hold-out institutions in the region.

If membership is based less on geography than on prestige and reputation, one generally finds a reluctance on the part of those who are already members to withdraw, even though they might be disappointed in current programs. On the outside would be an informal waiting list of those institutions who aspire to be thought of in connection with those inside. Yet, those consortia made up of institutions whose prestige is perceived as being a layer or so below first rank, the phenomena appears to be, by that degree, less common.

The voluntary consortium is by its nature relatively free of vested authority over the attaining and holding of individual members. While vital and useful programs and services to its members are primarily what keeps the consortium in business, one cannot underestimate the "glue" that initially brings together or holds together a consortium, particularly during trying times.

An institution's autonomy understandably undergoes modification when a consortium comes into being in its midst.

7. We Want to be the Way We are Now

I suppose no institution would insist upon a right to be mediocre, provincial or behind the times. Those who are such, by some standard or another, generally don't think of themselves that way. In fact, such institutions are generally a bit defensive on the subject and play up whatever virtues they have, real or imagined. At best, then, their position could be to insist upon a right to be left alone.

If my earlier observations are accurate, then a fair number of institutions associated with or located near consortia cannot quite expect to be left alone. In fact, their privelege of remaining mediocre, provincial or behind the times is endangered.

Consortium activities are generally built around institutional needs and problems. Proposed solutions are initiated by interinstitutional consultations and deliberations. If carefully done, and successful cooperation requires it, a detailed identification of a given problem as it appears on each of the campuses takes place. This is followed by a search for solutions currently in use elsewhere, sometimes with the use of consultants or visits to other institutions. A discussion of these alternatives as well as those developed locally reveals the shadings of enthusiasms and reluctances around the table for trying something different. Whether all present agree to the majority view or whether a real consensus develops, each institutional representative returns home with additional light on the subject. In fact, if several representatives generate considerable enthusiasm for a particular solution, the reluctant representative might even return home with a fear that other institutions might make some

progress on a problem while he may not and his own president may call him in to ask why his progress has not matched the others.

One can put aside consortium activities that have not worked well and go one's own way. As collective or joint efforts begin to show evidence that progress can be made, it is difficult for an institution to stand free of such influences.

While there have been meetings, reports, studies and workshops available to higher education from its beginnings, the consortium tends to add an intimate and cumulative push. It sets a time and place for such study or review of current practices and it leaves a local, nearby residue as evidence of its efforts.

Once drawn in, institutional representatives can tend to be less pleased with the way things have been done in the past. An observer must be careful however. It is rare that one sees a conservative faculty member throw out his former opinions or announce conversion based on an outside influence. Rather, he quietly tinkers, then shifts to beliefs he explains that he held all along and may in fact not remember very well what the consortium meeting suggested that he should do.

If an institution is active in consortium affairs, it doesn't get to stay the way it was. It does not follow, however, that cooperating institutions begin to emulate each other and draw toward a common set of characteristics. The influences mentioned above seem to operate in moving <u>from</u> complacency, self-satisfaction, or ignorance of alternatives. Moving <u>toward</u> a particular orthodoxy is another matter. Staff members tend to differ on how each might go about implementation in his own institutional setting.

One can agree to a cooperative program of study, planning, transfer, staff development, exchange, sharing, and joint purchasing and yet with perhaps even better reason and greater certainty than before insist upon the distinctiveness of ones own institution and its programs.

Perhaps an institutional spokesman will say, "we like the way we are now. We have made changes in the past. It was convenient to make changes while the consortium was discussing them since we were going to make them, anyway. We lead the rest of the consortium rather than they lead us."

In response, one can only say "blessed is that consortium where every member institution feels it can make that statement."

8. It is Expensive to Participate but We Can't Afford to Pull Out

So often an institution contemplating consortium membership or reviewing its budget line for membership fees considers the question of what it can afford to pay for consortium membership or simply determine what it is worth.

It was only a few years ago that no institution belonged to a consortium such as it is today. In a traditional sense, it has been suggested that a consortium is a recent luxury, acquired during a very brief period of affluence, that can be lined out in the next budget trimming exercise. Indeed, since it is at that moment that withdrawal from a consortium is so often decided, the president is at least partly correct when he informs his consortium colleages that he has been forced to withdraw because of a tight budget. At that point, the statement is socially acceptable all the way around, since the real reasons of personal antagonisms, disappointment with program emphases, inattention or ignorance of projects, inactivity, or contemplation of expansionism are very awkward to state or discuss.

One is reminded of an institution that withdrew from a consortium for financial reasons, then subsequently negotiated with the consortium to provide a single service for a price equal to the membership fee that would have come to it for free as a member.

The consortium membership fee stands out in most line item institutional budgets whether it is $1,000 or $35,000. Boards ask the president what the institution is getting for the money. It helps at this point to be able to point to something more tangible than a series of interesting meetings. It is tempting to point to the total amount of outside funding attracted by the consortium for cooperative projects. There are even those parsimonious enough to ask the president how much funds the consortium turned over to the institution itself to spend before deciding the consortium is expensive but "we can't afford to pull out".

For membership fee justifications, any consortium director will say there is nothing that helps so well as tangible evidence, hopefully in the form of dollars. For those consortia whose institutions participate in joint purchases, an individual price scale provides the differential. Where students are exchanged or joint instruction provided, the cost of individual replacement can be calculated. Joint use of consultants, outside support for workshops, support for instruction and student tuition are also elements for which a dollar value can be placed.

A problem presents itself with such calculations, however, if an institution may say that it would not have purchased the same quality on its own, or would have completely dropped the shared course and gotten its students to take something else. As with all of the various intangible consequences of consortium membership, some of which have been alluded to in earlier observations, the balance in the question of affording member is tipped on the

basis of net impressions of those making the institutional decision, which sometimes is simply summarized as, "being in the consortium has meant a great deal to this institution, we can't afford to pull out".

9. More Than One Consortium Wants Us

If an institution joins one consortium, would it be wise to join a second one? It is not very helpful to report that there are a number of such examples, including one that was a member of thirteen different inter-institutional arrangements of one sort or another which all began the same year! One must assume there was temporary advantage seen by those who proliferated such ties, and likely in the most tangible of forms, money! Identifying with institutions to meet special needs may take a university into a consortium sharing graduate instruction, another planning under-graduate programs and even a third smoothing out the transition of students between community colleges and four year institutions.

To benefit from a consortium, an institution must be prepared to give its involvement considerable time and attention. In the normal course of events, an institution generally finds these as scarce as money. A serious commitment to one or two consortia precludes an institution's effective participation in others. As one president of an over involved institution recently complained "they are always want'ng us to go to a meeting someplace".

10. United We Stand, Divided We Fall

There are challenges to institutional autonomy other than the voluntary consortium. Scarce funds, a growing concern with accountability, and public concern with duplicating educational services have stimulated regional and state planning of instructional services. Statutory agencies have been created across the land to coordinate higher education, both public and private.

Most observers now agree that such coordination will place serious limitations on institutional autonomy.

There remains to be determined, however, during these early years in the emergence of such involuntary coordination, just how much coordination will be needed to achieve minimal standards of efficiency and accountability. Most important is the matter of who shall provide the criteria and the proper balance in the respective roles of the public and private sectors of higher education.

It seems too obvious to call it a prediction that public and private institutions alike will individually stand back from this task which awaits them until some other political agency does it for them. Possible, state by state, it will be done by those who do not fully understand educational institutions and their manner of operation.

The consortium, as described in its more vital form, offers a possible alternative of the institution in shoring up those most vital ingredients in its autonomy. Regional consortia can present state planners and agencies with workable alternatives that will meet public pressures and requirements. Public and private institutions can together provide a proper and well considered balance of services.

SUMMARY

If we state the theoretical possibility that an institution can choose not to join a consortium or, having joined one, it can choose to participate in some or none of its projects, then it could be said that a consortium is not a significant challenge to that institution's autonomy.

As an active voluntary consortium tends to operate today, however, an institution's autonomy is not quite free of influence.

An institution's options may be significantly reduced and its neighbors may impose their own consensus on occasion.

It is not that consortium's decisions are binding upon its members. Seldom is this the case. Rather, the consortium may, by its shaping of a consensus, so alter the circumstances that an institution's independence of action is much less meaningful.

The attractiveness of the voluntary consortium to its members is that at least the alteration of circumstances is initiated by its peers and not by strangers to its cause and that of higher education. Each institution's views are heard and its vote is counted.

Institutions, in general agreement, can achieve a greater good than a mere sum of individual efforts. One is continually struck with the parallels between consortia and international organizations.